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5 Senate Republicans Maneuver to Become Leader of Their Pack

By Helen Dewar
Washington Post Staff Writer

Bob and Pete, with a little help from Jim, are working on their good-government badges. Ted is giving pep talks and trying to keep his temper in check. Dick wants to make sure that they can come back and do it again next year.

Much as they may act the part, they're not a bunch of Boy Scouts in pursuit of merit badges.

They're five of the leading Republicans in the United States Senate—Robert J. Dole of Kansas, Pete V. Domenici of New Mexico, James A. McClure of Idaho, Ted Stevens of Alaska and Richard G. Lugar of Indiana—who are competing to become leader of their pack by doing good deeds.

With varying degrees of commitment, they plan to run in a secret-ballot election conducted among all Republican senators next December to choose a successor to the retiring party leader, Howard H. Baker Jr. (R-Tenn.).

It will be an odd-man-out marathon that goes on until someone gets a majority. If the GOP retains control of the Senate in the November elections, the victor will be majority leader; if not, minority leader.

The contest is "polite, dignified, understated and very low-key," said Sen. Warren B. Rudman (R-N.H.). "Quite senatorial," said one of the contenders, meaning clubby, courtly and even a bit stuffy.

As of now, it's generally agreed there is no front-runner or even dominant set of challengers, and some senators expect the field to

narrow before the race gets to the final push.

As the most conservative figure in the race, McClure, currently chairman of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee, is believed by

some senators to start out with the biggest chunk of committed or semi-committed supporters but also with limited potential to cut into the broad middle of the party in the Senate.

The most prominent figure is Dole, chairman of the Finance Committee, whose showmanship and legislative skills rank among the best in the Senate.

But some senators confess privately to misgivings about the impact of his presidential ambitions on how he might run the Republican Party in the Senate and deal with the White House, even if it remains in the hands of President Reagan, whom Dole has shown no shyness about challenging in the past.

Some also question whether Dole could afford to risk a loss in light of his higher ambitions and wonder why he would even want the job, which involves at least as much drudgery as glory and tends to make its holder captive to the interests of others. Baker, they note, is leaving it to consider a run for the presidency.

Domenici, chairman of the Budget Committee, is well-liked but carries the scars of his seemingly endless budget battles. Although seriously interested in making the race, he has been somewhat hesitant about pushing his own candidacy, which some senators have interpreted as ambivalence.

Many figure Lugar as a potential final-stretch compromise, especially if his stewardship of the Senate GOP's campaign committee keeps the party in control of the Senate by a margin approaching the current 55-to-45 split.

Less ideological than McClure, less threatening than Dole, more even-tempered than Stevens and better positioned than Domenici, he cultivates the low-key, easy-going style of Baker. But his force has not been tested.

One theory, by no means universally held, is that a decision to go with Lugar would mean dominance of the Senate by the committee chairmen, who already hold considerable power in the collegial leadership style of Baker.

So far, aside from an occasional elbow to the ribs of a rival and a lot of posturing, preening and jockeying, the five have held their campaigns in check lest any infighting jeopardize the Republicans' chances of retaining control of the Senate.

So Dole and Domenici, as chairmen of two of the key fiscal committees, have been parading their skills as champions of deficit reduction, with occasional needling of Domenici by Dole that has stretched but not broken the no-combat rules.

McClure won some points on the deficit-reduction scorecard recently, too, with a compromise to shift funds from the synthetic fuels program to other domestic accounts that hastened passage of the Dole-Domenici deficit program.

Stevens, whose red-hot temper is almost a Senate legend, has been

stepping in recently as a voice of unity and conciliation in party councils.

Lugar has perhaps been the most diversified in his activities recently, even though he says he is not yet in the race officially because of his campaign chores. He has put together a fat kitty to aid Republican candidates this fall, with aid as well for senators running in 1986.

In recent weeks, he has also played statesman in helping to resolve a fight between the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and CIA Director William J. Casey and then was political point man in challenging Democratic presidential candidate Walter F. Mondale on the Chrysler bailout issue.

But, slow as it has been to start, the race is expected to intensify